

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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The Philippines: Perspectives On Presidential Succession

Summary

President Marcos's habit of keeping political institutions weak--including an ambiguous succession mechanism--points to a rocky road to new leadership. The jockeying that has accompanied Marcos's current health crisis has intensified widespread anxiety about the soundness of the succession process and has focused attention on moves in the National Assembly to clarify the legal mechanism.

Despite the process's weaknesses, Marcos's death probably would trigger the legal mechanism although we are less sure how far the process would be allowed to move forward. On the other hand, we believe Marcos's physical incapacitation would increase temptations within his inner circle to circumvent the constitutional process altogether. Imelda Marcos and her brother, Ambassador to the US Benjamin Romualdez, would be the likely prime movers in such a scheme, and they almost certainly would depend on General Ver to deliver military support for the move.

Factors at Play

debate over the prospects for a constitutional succession recently has

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dominated the agenda of senior officials in the military, the cabinet, and the ruling party. No Filipino knows how the succession would play out, and neither do we. It is possible however, to evaluate the pressures for and against the legal process that Marcos's demise would activate. [redacted]

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The constitution calls for the Speaker of the National Assembly--currently Nicanor Yniguez--to act as caretaker president if Marcos dies or is incapacitated before his term expires in 1987. The National Assembly is to agree on special election rules within seven days and the Speaker is then required to set an election day within 60 days of Marcos's demise. Constitutional provisions prevent the Speaker from declaring martial law, dissolving the Assembly, and using the presidential decree making powers. [redacted]

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[redacted] the Presidential Management Staff believes that this mechanism is open to legal interpretation. The staff also believes that the ambiguities could prompt debate within the National Assembly after Marcos dies over whether the Speaker would share presidential authority with the Prime Minister--Cesar Virata. Concern over the issue within the National Assembly is already evident. Two ruling party resolutions and two opposition resolutions designed to clarify the succession have been introduced in Assembly sessions in recent weeks.* No matter how the debate in the Assembly turns out, a variety of political factors suggest that the transition to new leadership will not be smooth. [redacted]

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Pressures Against The Constitutional Process

The key threat to the constitutional succession is that those with the most to lose from the legal transfer of power, in the event that Marcos dies, are in the best position to intervene in the process. Imelda Marcos and General Ver, in particular, are potentially the two greatest losers in the post-Marcos period, since neither has a strong independent power base. Imelda's personal popularity has plummeted in the aftermath of the Aquino assassination, and many ruling party members began viewing her as a political liability when she failed to deliver Manila's vote in the National Assembly election last May. General Ver's position has also steadily eroded since the

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[redacted] Philippine press reports indicate that one opposition resolution calls for the establishment of a panel of military physicians to examine Marcos--should he be in "seclusion" for several days--and then report its findings to the National Assembly. The local press has also reported a ruling party resolution that deals with the succession in the event the Speaker dies while acting as caretaker President. [redacted]

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assassination, and this decline has accelerated since the release of the Agrava Board's majority report in October. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, both continue to command political and military assets that would allow them to intervene as a succession plays itself out. Imelda Marcos's tight control over information on Marcos's health, for example, gives her an inside track. The speaker, moreover, has longstanding political ties to Imelda and may be willing to manipulate the constitutional provisions to her advantage. She would also be able to rely on the considerable political and financial resources of her brother, Ambassador to the US Benjamin "Kokoy" Romualdez. Romualdez reportedly has been quietly lobbying behind-the-scenes with ruling party officials the case for her candidacy in a presidential election. [redacted]

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General Ver's tenure as Chief of the Armed Forces since 1981 has allowed him to weave a network of political alliances among senior officers that--although weakening--might still afford him sufficient clout to alter the outcome of a succession contest. He almost certainly would be urged by other inner circle members--including Imelda or Marcos crony Eduardo Cojuangco--to defend their interests in the event that the leadership question is not settled before the National Assembly moves ahead with deciding on election procedures. [redacted]

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Pressures in Support

In our judgment, the legal succession mechanism would have extensive support in the event of Marcos's death. The military for example, has traditionally kept its distance in political affairs. Moreover, [redacted]

[redacted], on balance, the officer corps would be unlikely to oppose a legal successor unless peace and order in Manila were seriously threatened. [redacted]

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Much of the support for the constitution would come from Marcos's own ruling party--the KBL. Marcos's death would place initial control of the government in the hands of the KBL which, through its majority in the National Assembly, would determine the procedures for the special election. The commission that oversees elections (COMELEC), moreover, is a ruling party creation--thus increasing the opportunity for manipulation of election results. This suggests that pressures for extraconstitutional measures initially would not be great, provided that those at the helm of the party determine that they can control the election. [redacted]

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Several key KBL members who we believe will emerge as presidential candidates are Defense Minister Enrile, Deputy Prime Minister Rono, and Foreign Minister Tolentino--each of whom has much to gain from the constitutional process. Rono is reportedly well respected within the party, as is Tolentino, and both will

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probably receive support from party kingpins. [redacted]
 [redacted] Enrile is not as popular. Recently, however, he has reportedly been mending fences within the party and taken a lower profile in the National Assembly in an effort to make himself a more palatable potential presidential candidate. In addition, Enrile recently has made cooperative overtures to the US Embassy that underscore his presidential ambition. We believe that members within this group will seek to build alliances from ruling party factions, and perhaps will begin seeking support from within the business community, the church, and the moderate opposition. [redacted]

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Other advocates of an orderly succession would include members of the moderate opposition, who will view Marcos's demise as their first real opportunity to share power since the declaration of martial law in 1972. Most opposition leaders reportedly are convinced that the succession mechanism, however imperfect, will probably prevail and they have begun contingency planning in the event of Marcos's death. Opposition representatives from UNIDO, PDP-Laban, and the Liberal Party are reportedly attempting to agree on a "fast track" slate of contenders--including Salvador Laurel, Eva Estrada Kalaw, and Butz Aquino--who could be pitted against the presidential candidate from the ruling party. [redacted]
 opposition leaders acknowledge their unity is fragile and they have avoided trying to agree on a single candidate. [redacted]
 [redacted] some opposition members are considering alliances with ruling party members, including an Enrile/Ramon Mitra (PDP-LABAN) presidential ticket. [redacted]

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If Marcos Is Incapacitated

The picture will be more complicated--and prospects for the constitution less promising--if Marcos is incapacitated. Only a declaration of Marcos's incapacitation by the first family or a formal determination by the National Assembly that Marcos is unfit to rule will trip the legal succession mechanism. Imelda Marcos, therefore, would be strongly tempted to hide Marcos's medical condition in order to gain time and maneuvering room for a succession struggle. Marcos's concealed incapacitation under such circumstances would work to the disadvantage of other inner circle members. [redacted]

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We believe the political climate in Manila would become increasing unstable as anxiety about the true status of Marcos's health mounted. If violence erupted in Manila under these circumstances, the military could choose to intervene in a succession crisis. Widespread civil unrest, we believe, would almost certainly force the military to assume the role of principal power broker, even if it were disinclined to do so. [redacted]
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We cannot rule out the possibility that Mrs. Marcos would try to seize power if she determined that she could not win

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support from the ruling party. She would almost certainly depend on Ver for support. Ramos's potential role in this case would be more likely influenced by the wishes of both opposition leaders and ruling party officials such as Prime Minister Virata. The long standing enmity between Ramos and Imelda Marcos--she reportedly favored Army Chief Ramos over Ramos for the Acting Chief of Staff position--makes it unlikely that he would be influenced by her. [redacted]

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Can A Leadership Crisis Be Avoided?

One of the leading arguments for a legal succession occurring is that several key players who would be involved have recently moved to bolster its prospects. The Speaker has met with key military leaders, including Generals Ver and Ramos, to solicit pledges to uphold the constitution during a succession crisis. He received such pledges from both men, with General Ramos publicly stating that the military will uphold the constitution. In our view, General Ver's current unsettled status weakens the chances of military intervention in a constitutional succession contest. Although Ver loyalists continue to control key commands in Manila, it is not clear that these ties would automatically translate into support for an extra-constitutional bid for power. [redacted] already suggests that as Ramo's tenure lengthens, Ver's control over the military is becoming increasingly tenuous. [redacted]

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Much institution-building has taken place over the past year, probably more than most observers of the Philippines had expected after nearly a decade of martial law. The new National Assembly is a far more vigorous body than its predecessor, and both ruling party and opposition performances have stirred memories of the open--and according to many critics, free-wheeling--pre-martial law Congress. At the same time, several actions of the Supreme Court and the legal proceedings that have accompanied the release of the Agrava Board's majority findings point to a more independent judiciary. [redacted]

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On balance, however, the continued strengthening of political institutions--including the tightening of the succession process--will take more time than events surrounding Marcos's health will probably allow. For that reason, we believe that a rough and dirty succession contest is probable, even as these things go in the Philippines. The levers that were built into the current constitution, including a weak succession mechanism, afford room for large-scale manipulation of the system. The military's potentially conflicting role in domestic politics, moreover, makes it probable that pressures to short-circuit the constitutional process will be high. [redacted]

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